

Presentation 6

Hwang Ui-won (Mediawatch Representative Director)

The Present State of the Movement in South Korea Against the Registration of Japan's Sado Island Gold Mines as a World Heritage Site

Introduction

On February 1, 2022, the Japanese Cabinet, led by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, announced its decision to promote the registration of the Sado gold mines as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The South Korean government immediately objected to this, and on February 3, the Blue House (the executive office of the president) announced its plans to construct a joint public-private task force and pursue comprehensive countermeasures. Seminars on how to obstruct the listing are to be held in the private sector while several left-wing groups have already taken to the streets and held rallies to denounce the Japanese government and urge it to apologize, demonstrating South Korea's determination to force a breakthrough in its historical war on Japan.

Such a series of joint public-private opposition movements regarding both the anti-Japanese and forced labor issues is certainly not without precedent in South Korea. In 2015, in order to prevent the listing of Hashima Island as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the South Korean government and left-wing civil society waged an all-out war both domestically and internationally; even after the island's registration was confirmed, their efforts continued in the form a propaganda campaign that artfully distorted historical facts through films and entertainment. Despite Hashima Island's listing, the South Korean government and left-wing civil society's obsession with the forced labor issue still shows no sign of abating.

Regarding the current issue of the Sado mines' registration, it is expected that the South Korean government and left-wing civil society will develop a more organized and sophisticated approach in their opposition. Even with the recent transition of power in South Korea to a relatively pro-Japanese administration, because the new government is already a minority in parliament, there is a possibility that it may adopt populist politics which rely heavily on anti-Japanese sentiment as a bulwark to protect itself.

Earlier this year, on January 28 (the day the Agency for Cultural Affairs decided to promote the registration of the Sado mines), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea summoned Koichi Aiboshi, the Japanese ambassador to South Korea, to express its indignation and protest, claiming that the registration "ignores the painful history of forced labor" and

demanding that Japan “immediately desist in its attempts to register the Sado mines as a World Heritage site”. Six days later, a central Blue House official explained at a press conference that the Ministry “will deal mainly with the joint public-private task force of relevant organizations and experts, and actively cooperate with the international community”. On February 2, the ruling Democratic Party of Korea, which occupies two-thirds of parliamentary seats in South Korea, also demanded the withdrawal of the recommendation. The party made its position clear, lamenting that “it is deplorable that the Japanese government wishes to register the site of the untold sorrow of our ancestors and the brutal violation of their human rights under the forced mobilization and exploitative labor during the Imperial Japanese occupation as a World Heritage site” and condemned the listing as “a barbaric act that shows contempt for the people of South Korea and which runs counter to the spirit of deep remorse over the past colonization of our country expressed in the 1998 Japan-South Korea Joint Declaration”.

On February 10, President Moon Jae-in indicated his position on the Sado gold mines directly in a written interview, stating that “the essence of the historical issues of the past is the universally shared value of human rights. If these issues are to be resolved, solutions must meet with the approval of the victims”. To that end, he elaborated, “there is nothing more important when facing history than sincerity of attitude and heart”. This can also effectively be interpreted as a request for the withdrawal of the recommendation.

As if taking advantage of this momentum, ruling party (at the time) members in local governments also followed suit in speaking out on the matter. On February 11, the Gwangju City Council was the first to adopt a resolution requesting the suspension of the Sado mines’ recommendation, after which Mokpo City Council, Sejong City Council, Changwon City Council, Gangbuk District Council in Seoul, and Jeonju City Council also submitted similar resolutions one after the other.

It would seem that the election of Yoon Suk-yeol, who revealed his desire to improve Korea-Japan relations during the presidential election, has inspired some hope in Japan that when he enters the Blue House in May, the movement against the listing will subside to some extent. However, it is important to understand that this is simply wishful thinking and that should Japan let its guard down, it may be subjected to an insurmountable attack that sees the situation become irretrievable.

Even after his entry into politics, Yoon Suk-yeol has never clarified his stance on the long-pending historical issues between South Korea and Japan. He is by no means a man with any firm belief on these issues. On the contrary, the exclusive interview he held with putative former comfort woman Lee Yong-soo during his campaign where he promised to get an apology from Japan would seem to be indicative of a propensity for anti-Japanese populism;

this is something not even his fanatically anti-Japanese opponent Lee Jae-myung did. The Yoon Suk-yeol administration will resort to this kind of behavior in the future any time it faces a drop in approval ratings or other crises.

Incumbent president Yoon's key diplomatic adviser is Kim Seong-hee, the former Second Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It should be noted that Kim also made clear in an interview with a Japanese newspaper that he considered it "worrying" that Japan was "seeking to have the Sado mines, a site of forced labor, designated as a World Cultural Heritage site".

2. Media coverage

On January 28, following the announcement of the Agency for Cultural Affairs' decision to recommend the Sado gold mines, the news was quickly broadcast across leading South Korean media outlets KBS, SBS, JoongAng Ilbo, Yonhap News Agency, and others. On the day of the announcement alone, more than 40 related articles were published. In particular, the Hankyoreh, a prominent left-wing newspaper in South Korea, strongly condemned the series of decisions in an editorial.

In its editorial, the Hankyoreh vented its bullish opinion that "the registration of yet another historical site of forced mobilization as a Cultural Heritage site can only be described as shameless", warning that "if, amid the deteriorating relations between South Korea and Japan, a "second Hashima Island incident" were to develop over the listing of the Sado mines, any hope for the improvement of relations between the two countries will wane even further".

As if attempting to outdo this, major newspapers such as the Dong-A Ilbo (January 18), Chosun Ilbo (February 2), Kyunghyang Shinmun (February 12), Busan Ilbo (March 5), and the Hankook Ilbo (March 9) all published columns which focused on berating the Japanese government, stating that the "full history" of the Sado mines should be reflected, including its dark underside.

There were also endless T.V. reports on the mines, most notably the exclusive report by the South Korean national public broadcaster Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), broadcast across two days between January 27-28. After investigating Sado's underground mines, local Japanese correspondent Ji Jung-ik also interviewed the chief of the jurisdiction and the director of the Niigata Prefecture World Heritage Registration Promotion Office. During the broadcast, when asked by the anchor, "should the South Korean government pursue a more aggressive approach?", Ji replied that "it's believed that there were no victims of forced mobilization other than Koreans at the Sado mines. Furthermore, unlike the case of Hashima Island, securing cooperation from the international community may prove quite difficult due to the severe lack of research and investigation. As this report has confirmed, we can't afford to waste any time in obtaining the list of names of these Korean laborers, finding witnesses,

and preparing documents that can verify the coercive nature of the mobilization”.

On the other hand, Yonhap News Agency, one of South Korea's leading news agencies, published an article explicitly denigrating the opinion letter on the Sado mines published in the Niigata Nippo by the Japan Research Center for Historical Awareness, dismissing it as the “agitation of a right-wing organization”. The article cherry-picked quotes from Hideki Yano, executive director of Joint Action for Resolution of the Forced Labor Issue and Settlement of Past Issues, and categorically condemned the opinion letter.

The South Korean media’s coverage of the Sado mines is characterized by willful ignorance of the primary source documents and testimonies of residents that evidently exist in favor of a verbatim repetition of the “forced labor” arguments of South Korean academia. Its clinical selection of only those scholars and intellectuals congenial to these claims for interviews and pragmatic filtering of documents for publication have resulted in highly distorted reporting. The issue is that this systematic selection and concentrated flow of solely biased reporting has robbed South Koreans of the capacity to comprehend Japan’s perspective and left them unable to develop a balanced perception. In that sense, it may be necessary for Japan to construct a small but strong public relations channel for South Korea in the future, which honestly conveys Japan's position.

3. Academic and Research Circles

It is also worth considering trends in South Korean academia and research. On January 27, the Foundation for Victims of Forced Mobilization by Imperial Japan held a seminar on “the distorted history of forced labor at the Sado mines” prior to the decision to promote the UNESCO registration. Four experts participated in a debate, including Chung Hye-kyung, the principal researcher of the Research Center for the Forced Mobilization of Imperial Japan and Peace Studies, and Professor Kang Dong-jin of Kyung Sung University, the foremost authorities on the subject in South Korean academia, who also both took charge of questions. In her book *Land of Greed: The Mitsubishi Sado Mines and the Forced Mobilization of Koreans* (2021), Chung Hye-kyung describes how “the number of Koreans subjected to forced labor at the Sado mines reached 1,200, and many died of pneumoconiosis”. It is currently one of the best-selling books in South Korea.

The Northeast Asian History Foundation also criticized the Tokyo Government at an academic seminar titled “Response to the Forced Registration of Japan’s Sado Mines as a World Heritage Site and its Connotations” held on February 16. The Northeast Asian History Foundation published two reports, one in January (*The Mitsubishi Sado Mines*) and the other in March (*Criteria for World Heritage Selection and Japan’s Conduct*).

In addition to these movements, the actions of de facto activist anti-Japanese scholars such as Seo Kyoung-Duk and Yuji Hosaka also warrant close observation. On March 1, Seo Kyoung-Duk, a professor at Sungshin Women's University, began a signature campaign protesting the listing of the Sado mines as a World Heritage Site, which is currently being widely disseminated through the media and various social media platforms. He told the media that he plans to promote the movement globally through the world's most influential media and produce and distribute videos in multiple languages.

Professor Yuji Hosaka of Sejong University also appears daily on various sub-channels and YouTube broadcasts, criticizing Japan in no uncertain terms. Earlier this year, in an interview with Yonhap News Agency, he expounded the theory that Korean workers at the Sado mines were not “recruited” but “forced to work” on the premise that the period of Japanese occupation itself was illegal. He asserted in this interview that South Korea was now engaged in a historical battle with the far right that will last until July next year.

4. Private Organizations

Finally, I would like to speak about related activities in the South Korean private sector. VANK, a nationalist organization advocating a cyber diplomatic mission, launched a campaign against the registration of the Sado mines at the end of February, and is leading the movement to prevent its listing on a number of fronts. VANK has started the “Five Major Global Public Relations Projects” and will promote special classes at elementary, junior, and senior high schools both within South Korea and abroad, build an English public relations site, and inform the public of the falsified history of the Sado mines at Holocaust centers.

Ahead of the March 1 Independence Movement Day, the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance (formerly the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery), a left-wing organization that has organized mass public demonstrations nationwide and spread propaganda concerning former comfort women, held a rally to denounce the Japanese government’s decision and demand an apology.

Elsewhere, the Northeast Asia Biodiversity Research Center located on Jeju Island officially launched the “King Cherry Project 2050” on February 18 and is in the process of conducting a kind of protest in connection with this registration issue. The main objective of the project is reportedly to cut down all the Japanese cherry blossom trees (Yoshino cherry) planted in South Korea by 2050 and replace them with the Korean king cherry. Extensive anti-Japanese movements of such citizen groups are expected to continue until UNESCO’s decision at the next review.

Conclusion

It is no exaggeration to consider this historical war between South Korea and Japan as a continuation of the feud over the “Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution” in July 2015. It is worth reflecting on the circumstances of Hashima Island’s UNESCO listing. At a meeting held a month before the UNESCO vote on Hashima Island’s inclusion was to take place, Yun Byung-se (the Minister of Foreign Affairs of South Korea at the time) and Fumio Kishida (the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan) agreed to cooperate, as the South Korean government was also promoting the UNESCO registration of the “Baekje Historic Areas”. Japan kept its promise and the South Korean heritage’s registration was unanimously passed. However, as Japan’s turn approached, South Korea suddenly demanded the addition of the expression “forced labor” to the portrayal of the site. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a sense, agreed to a fatal compromise, with the slightly softened language of “forced to work”. Japan’s spineless handling of the issue at such a critical juncture is to blame for this episode.

Japan must first openly defend the truth; it must realize that its current attitude of neglecting the truth in favor of prioritizing a passable relationship with South Korea above all else is hugely detrimental to the future relations between the two countries.

Regardless of the successful registration of Hashima Island or the election of a relatively pro-Japanese South Korean government, Japan cannot afford to let its guard down. On a spring day in 1615, Ieyasu Tokugawa advised Naotaka Ii, who had taken a break after completing the siege of Osaka, that “in the moment of victory, hold fast to your helmet”. In other words, “be wary then; best safety lies in fear”.

The moment Japan falters before the truth or crows to the cause of friendship, South Korea, or more precisely, the forces behind its lies, will launch a merciless counterattack and demoralize the forces of truth in Japan and South Korea.

These South Korean fabulists have already accepted Japan’s declaration of historical war. It is time for the forces of truth in South Korea and Japan to further consolidate their position and fight back.